
NIETZSCHE'S JESUS

Author(s): RONALD A. CARSON

Source: *CrossCurrents*, WINTER 1971, Vol. 21, No. 1, 20th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE (WINTER 1971), pp. 39-52

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24457566>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *CrossCurrents*

JSTOR

NIETZSCHE'S JESUS

Friedrich Nietzsche, though practically illiterate theologically,¹ was, perhaps by virtue of his training in philology, not unaware of the problems involved in any attempt to discover who Jesus was. We know that he had read the lives of Jesus of both David Strauss and Renan (whom he calls "that buffoon in *psychologism*" for introducing "the two most inappropriate concepts possible into his explanation of the Jesus type: the concept of *genius* and the concept of the *hero*. . . ."²) But neither was it the philological problem as such presented by the Gospels which concerned him.

What concerns *me* is the psychological type of the Redeemer. After all, this could be contained in the Gospels, however mutilated or overloaded with alien features: as Francis of Assisi is preserved in his legends, despite his legends. *Not* the truth concerning what he did, what he said, how he really died; but the question *whether* his type can still be exhibited at all, whether it has been "transmitted." (II, 1190)

Karl Barth tells us that David Strauss, in his first *Life of Jesus* (1835–36), "made everything, without exception, historically uncertain."³ Nietzsche took Strauss's critical findings seriously, so seriously in fact that what were for Strauss historically uncertain documents became for Nietzsche "saints' legends," and the application of scientific methods to them "mere scholarly idleness." (II, 1190) As early as 1886 Nietzsche wrote, in a letter to his friend, von Gersdorff, "If Christianity means 'faith in an historical event or in an historical person,' then I have nothing to do with this Christianity. On the other hand, if it means simply to be in need of redemption, then I can esteem it highly. . . ." (III, 962–63) This early emphasis on redemption is the first clue to Nietzsche's conception of Jesus as a Redeemer type. What does Nietzsche mean by redemption? What does it mean to be in need of redemption?

We know a state in which the *sense of touch* is pathologically excitable and shrinks from any contact, from grasping a solid object. One should translate such a physiological *habitus* into its ultimate consequence. . . .

The instinctive hatred of reality: a consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and excitement which no longer wants any contact at all because it feels every contact too deeply.

The instinctive exclusion of any antipathy, any hospitality, any boundaries or divisions in man's feelings; the consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and excitement which experiences any

Ronald A. Carson teaches religion at New College, Sarasota, Florida.

resistance, even any compulsion to resist, as unendurable *displeasure* (that is, as *harmful*, as something against which the instinct of self-preservation *warns* us); and finds blessedness (pleasure) only in no longer offering any resistance to anybody, neither to evil nor to him who is evil—love as the only, the *last* possible way of life.

These are the two *physiological realities* on which, out of which, the doctrine of redemption grew. . . . The fear of pain, even of infinitely minute pain—that can end in no other way than in a *religion of love*. (II, 1191)

Nietzsche's answer to the question about redemption is a psychological answer (what he calls "physiological"). To be in need of redemption is to be neurotic; it is the direct consequence of a pathological inability to bear even the minutest pain. It is, in Nietzsche's terminology, decadent; that is, a symptom of declining, waning life.

But Nietzsche is doing more than answering the question about redemption. The conclusions he has drawn from his reading of the Gospels amount no longer to the mere possibility of gleaning the psychological type of the Redeemer from these "saints' legends" (in spite of them), but to an affirmation that the Redeemer type is, in fact, preserved there, though "only in extensive distortion." (II, 1192) Nietzsche is quick to admit that the type might have been preserved *without* distortion, which is to say that "as a type of decadence, the type *might* actually have been peculiarly manifold and contradictory." (II, 1193) Though possible, he considers it unlikely, for in order for this to be the case, two equally unlikely assumptions would have to be made: that the record is absolutely trustworthy, and that the type shows no "traces of the milieu in which he [Jesus] moved as a foreign figure." (II, 1193) On the trustworthiness of the record, we have already heard Nietzsche's view. As to the milieu in which Jesus moved:

That queer and sick world into which the Gospels introduce us—as in a Russian novel, a world in which the scum of society, nervous disorders, and "childlike" idiocy seem to be having a rendezvous—must in any case have *coarsened* the type: in order to be able to understand anything of it, the first disciples, in particular, first translated into their own crudity an existence which was wholly embedded in symbols and incomprehensibilities—for them the type did not *exist* until it had been reshaped in better-known forms. The prophet, the Messiah, the future judge, the moral teacher, the miracle man, John the Baptist—each another chance to misconstrue the type.

. . . It is regrettable that a Dostoevsky did not live near this most interesting of all decadents—I mean someone who would have known how to sense the very stirring charm of such a mixture of the sublime, the sickly and the childlike.

. . . Meanwhile there is a gaping contradiction between the sermonizer on the mount, lake, and meadow, whose appearance seems like that of a Buddha on soil that is not at all Indian, and that fanatic of aggression, that mortal enemy of theologians and priests, whom Renan's malice has glorified as *le grand maître en ironie*. I

myself have no doubt that a generous dose of gall (and even of *esprit*) first flowed into the type of the Master from the excited state of Christian propaganda. . . .

To repeat, I am against any attempt to introduce the fanatic into the Redeemer type. (II, 1192–93)⁴

The coarsening of the Redeemer type by the milieu in which Jesus moved was, according to Nietzsche, a paradigm of what was to come. “The history of Christianity, beginning with the death on the cross, is the history of the misunderstanding, growing cruder with every step, of an *original* symbolism.” (II, 1198) As a token of how drastically Jesus’ disciples misunderstood him, Nietzsche cites their reaction to his death. They wanted revenge, “precisely the most unevangelical feeling.” Forgiveness is what Jesus was about, Nietzsche is saying, and the most evangelic thing the disciples could have done would have been to forgive Jesus’ death. Instead, they thought of judgment and retribution. “Evidently the small community did *not* understand the main point, the exemplary character of this kind of death, the freedom, the superiority over any feeling of *ressentiment*. . . .” (II, 1202)

In the reference above to Jesus’ life as an existence which was wholly embedded in symbols and incomprehensibilities is revealed yet another clue to Nietzsche’s conception of Jesus, namely that redemption, and thus the Redeemer type, are conceivable and explicable only symbolically. The problem is one of symbolism, and Jesus is “a symbolist par excellence. . . .” (II, 1194) “If I understand anything about this great symbolist, it is that he accepted only inner realities as realities, as ‘truths’—that he understood the rest, everything natural, temporal, spatial, historical, only as signs, as occasions for parables.” (II, 1196)

Symbolism is, indeed, the second major clue to Nietzsche’s conception of Jesus as a psychological Redeemer type. For this type, inner realities are the only realities, and being a Christian is thus a matter of the heart. “The ‘glad tidings’ are precisely that there are no longer any opposites; the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children. . . .” (II, 1193)

In the whole psychology of the “evangel” the concept of guilt and punishment is lacking; also the concept of reward. “Sin”—any distance separating God and man—is abolished: *precisely this is the “glad tidings.”* Blessedness is not promised, it is not tied to conditions: it is the only reality—the rest is a sign with which to speak of it. (II, 1195)

The deep instinct for how one must live, in order to feel oneself “in heaven,” to feel “eternal,” while in all other behavior one decidedly does *not* feel oneself “in heaven”—this alone is the psychological reality of “redemption.” A new way of life, *not* a new faith. (II, 1196)

Blessedness is the only reality, and the purpose of living a Christian life, of “evangelical practice,” is, in the language of the theological tradition associated with Paul, Augustine, and Luther, justification; in

Nietzsche's words, "that one feels 'divine,' 'blessed,' 'evangelical,' at all times a 'child of God.'" (II, 1195) Which is not to say, however, that this inner reality has no outward and visible manifestation. Quite the contrary.

The consequence of such a state projects itself into a new practice, the genuine evangelical practice. It is not a "faith" that distinguishes the Christian: the Christian *acts*, he is distinguished by acting *differently*: by not resisting, either in words or in his heart, those who treat him ill; by making no distinction between foreigner and native, between Jew and non-Jew ("the neighbor"—really the co-religionist, the Jew); by not growing angry with anybody, by not despising anybody; by not permitting himself to be seen or involved at courts of law ("not swearing"); by not divorcing his wife under any circumstances, not even if his wife has been proved unfaithful. All of this at bottom one principle; all of these, consequences of one instinct. (II, 1195)

Thus, the evangelical practice is two-pronged: it is both the way to blessedness, the inner reality—justification; and a *consequence* of it, outward—in the theological language of the Reformation, sanctification. Nietzsche himself says as much. Nevertheless, he also insists with regard to the outward manifestation of the inner reality that "one should beware of finding more than a sign language in this, a semeiology, an occasion for parables." (II, 1194) However much we might wish to derive an ethic from Nietzsche's "doctrine of sanctification," we can do so only by doing violence to his conception of a very private psychological type of the Redeemer.

This "bringer of glad tidings" died as he had lived, as he had taught—not to "redeem men" but to show how one must live. This practice is his legacy to mankind: his behavior before the judges, before the catchpoles, before the accusers and all kinds of slander and scorn—his behavior on the *cross*. He does not resist, he does not defend his right, he takes no step which might ward off the worst; on the contrary, he *provokes* it. And he begs, he suffers, he loves *with* those, *in* those, who do him evil. The words to the *thief* on the cross contain the entire Gospel. "That was truly a *godlike* man, a child of God," says the thief. "If this is what you feel," answers the Redeemer, "*then you are in paradise*, you are a child of God." *Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, *not* to hold responsible—but to resist not even the evil one—to *love* him. (II, 1197)

All this however not for others, but solely for himself, that is, for his own redemption. For Nietzsche, the only valid way to speak of an ethic with regard to Jesus is in the context of symbolism. That is to say, Jesus is not to be understood as living *for others* in any conventional religious or ethical sense (he neither died *for others*⁵ nor lived *for others*), but as living and dying *before others*—as a model, in short, as a type. The ethical inference, if indeed it can be called that, being this: as he lived and felt himself "redeemed," "in paradise," so should you live if you desire to feel

yourself “redeemed.” Jesus’ example is his legacy, but only in this distinct sense.

. . . only Christian *practice*, a life such as he lived who died on the cross, is Christian.

Such a life is still possible today, for certain people even necessary: genuine original Christianity will be possible at all times.

Not a faith, but a doing; above all, a *not* doing of many things, another state of being. (II, 1200)

What are the “glad tidings”? True life, eternal, has been found—it is not promised, it is here, it is *in you*: as a living in love, in love without subtraction and exclusion, without regard for station. Everyone is the child of God—Jesus definitely presumes nothing for himself alone—and as a child of God everyone is equal to everyone. (II, 1191)

Not a being for others, but a state of blessedness—these are the glad tidings. And the bringer of these tidings is neither hero nor genius but a symbolist par excellence. “Spoken with the precision of a physiologist, even an entirely different word would still be more fitting here—the word idiot.” (II, 1191)

II

In what possible way could Nietzsche be using the word “idiot”? Solely for its shock value? Walter Kaufmann has written, “That the book [*The Antichrist*] is meant to be shockingly blasphemous scarcely needs saying.”⁶ And the use of the word “idiot” in referring to Jesus did indeed shock, not Nietzsche’s readers in the first instance, however, but his sister, who suppressed the phrase “the word idiot” when she published the book in 1895. Not until 1931 was the phrase made public (in an attempt to prove that Nietzsche was insane when he wrote *The Antichrist*).⁷ Then in 1938 Karl Jaspers mentioned in passing in a lecture, “Nietzsche means idiot in the sense in which Dostoevsky calls his Prince Myshkin an idiot.”⁸ Though he leaves it unsubstantiated, Jaspers’ claim bears looking into. Walter Kaufmann has since drawn attention to the sudden significance which the word “idiot” assumes in Nietzsche’s work after his discovery of Dostoevsky in early 1887.⁹ Although it is impossible to know for certain whether Nietzsche ever in fact read *The Idiot*, we do know that there was a French translation of the novel available at this time. In his letters, beginning with one dated Nice, 23 February 1887, references to Dostoevsky and works other than *The Idiot* appear with increasing frequency. Having discovered a French translation of *Notes from the Underground* in a bookstore, Nietzsche writes Overbeck, “The instinct of kinship (or what should I call it?) expressed itself at once; I was overjoyed.” (III, 1250) Less than two weeks later he writes to Peter Gast about his recent discovery, praising Dostoevsky both as psychologist (specifically, in his *The House of the Dead*) and as artist (in *The In-*

sulted and the Injured), and calling *The House of the Dead* “one of the ‘most human books’ that exists.” And here again he mentions “the sudden sense of having encountered a brother.” (III, 1254) For Nietzsche to admit having found a psychologist whom he considers his equal is rare indeed, but he goes even further, which is nothing short of astonishing. In *Twilight of the Idols* he confesses that Dostoevsky, “this profound human being,” is “the only psychologist, incidentally, from whom I had something to learn. . . .” (II, 1021)¹⁰ And from Turin, shortly before his collapse, Nietzsche writes Georg Brandes (20 October 1888), thanking him for his efforts to introduce his works to a wider audience (Brandes lectured on Nietzsche in Copenhagen in 1888 and introduced him to a number of his acquaintances in Scandinavia),

Oh how diligent you are! And, idiot that I am, I do not even understand Danish! That one can, as you say, “come to life again in Russia,” I have no doubt. I reckon any Russian book, above all Dostoevsky (in French translation, for heaven’s sake, not German!), among my greatest reliefs. (III, 1326)

It is true, as Kaufmann has said, that Nietzsche’s “whole attitude toward Jesus hinges upon ‘something’ which he ‘learned’ from Dostoevsky.”¹¹ Further, on the basis of the overwhelming circumstantial evidence here assembled, it is surely possible to claim that that something was the psychological type of the Redeemer—in the person of Prince Myshkin.

We have it from Dostoevsky himself that his intention in writing *The Idiot* was “to depict a positively good man.” Therein lie both the strength of the novel as a whole and the magnificence of Myshkin as a character, on the one hand, and on the other the failure of the prince as the epitome of positive goodness. “I have long been haunted by a certain idea, but I was afraid of making a novel of it, because the idea is very difficult and I am not ready for it. The idea is—to create a positively good man.”¹² “A certain idea”—if it is possible to pick out one motif which informs Dostoevsky’s work from beginning to end, it must surely be the recurring motif of “the idea.” One critic has written of it as Dostoevsky’s “fundamental equation: man=idea.” That is to say, the dominant figures in his novels “face us not as theorizing individuals but as personified ideas in action, or to use the French philosophical form, as *idées-forces* . . . their psychological life appears entirely adapted and subordinated to a fixed idea, as it were.”¹³ That they do not appear as mere phantoms but as human beings, alive, aware and acting, is due to the massive achievement of Dostoevsky’s art. Prince Myshkin is, to be sure, the personification of an idea; his creator says as much in the letter cited above. But, thanks to Dostoevsky’s artistry, he is also a man.

From what did Dostoevsky derive his idea of goodness? “There is only one positively good man in the world—Christ. . . .,” he writes.¹⁴ To facilitate a proper appraisal of Nietzsche’s conception of Jesus as the psycho-

logical type of the Redeemer, let us look at Dostoevsky's conception of Christ as the only positively good man in the world.

Prince Myshkin is variously described as being simple-hearted, absent-minded, naïve, meek, gullible, unsuspecting, awkward, honest, innocent, inarticulate, noble, childlike, boundlessly trustful, morbidly sensitive; as having no sense of proportion but a seemingly infinite capacity for bearing persecution and for forgiveness, whatever the misdeed and regardless whether it was innocently performed or maliciously premeditated. In the words of Princess Byelovsky to Lizaveta Prokofyevna as she took leave after the scandalous incident in which Myshkin broke the valuable china vase and fell victim to a fit of epilepsy, "Well, there's good and bad in him. And if you care to know my opinion, there's more bad than good. You can see for yourself what he is, a sick man!"¹⁵

In a passage which George Steiner has called "one of the very great passages in *The Idiot*—indeed, in the history of the novel,"¹⁶ we get a glimpse of the prince at his best. Varya has just denounced Nastasya Filippovna as a "shameless woman" for announcing that she has no intention of marrying her brother, Ganya, but goading him nevertheless into offering to pay one hundred thousand rubles for her.

Everything danced before Ganya's eyes, and, completely forgetting himself, he struck at his sister with all his might. He would have hit her on the face, but suddenly another hand caught Ganya's. Myshkin stood between him and his sister.

"Don't, that's enough," he brought out insistently, though he was shaking all over with violent emotion.

"Are you always going to get in my way?" roared Ganya. He let go Varya's arm and, mad with rage, gave Myshkin a violent slap in the face with the hand thus freed. (*Idiot*, 109)

This is a great passage, and yet the episode is so powerful and rings so true virtually because it is here lifted out of its context. In the body of the novel, as the awareness of Myshkin's "goodness" mounts, it is accompanied by an oppressive tension. Those around him cannot endure this kind of perfection. Aglaia reveals something to Myshkin which impresses him so much that he vows to remember it and think it over: "You have no tenderness, nothing but truth, and so you judge unjustly." (*Idiot*, 406) Aglaia is certainly too harsh in accusing Myshkin of lacking in all tenderness, but she has touched upon something important in the second part of her indictment. Earlier on, before reciting the poem about the "poor Knight," Aglaia had spoken of her deep respect for the poem because it "simply describes a man who is capable of an ideal, and what's more, a man who having once set an ideal before him has faith in it, and having faith in it, gives up his life blindly for it." (*Idiot*, 235) Precisely this—Myshkin's blind faith in the ideal of love as pity,¹⁷ "the fundamental idea of Christ," (*Idiot*, 208) is what causes him to be unjust and ultimately to destroy those he loves.

Nicholas Berdyaev has written, "Dostoevsky understood Christianity as the religion of love that it is . . . of unbounded love."¹⁸ But Dostoevsky was honest in making his drama of unbounded love a *tragedy*. We err if we see *The Idiot* as an indictment of love; it is *unbounded* love that is tragic. In short, the protective, pitying love and the indiscriminate, undistinguishing forgiveness of the prince, which causes one critic to see Myshkin laboring under a "psychosis of humility."¹⁹ John Middleton Murry, calling Myshkin "the incarnation of pity," says of him, "He is perfect man, but this perfection is a denial of humanity."²⁰ And Berdyaev again, in a similar vein,

It is he who explains all the riddles, especially those of two women, Aglaia and Nastasya Filippovna; he helps them, he is full of prophetic foresight and intuitive clear-sightedness, and he gives himself up entirely to human relationship. The storm whirls around him, but he lives in a rapture of quietness.²¹

Both Nastasya and Aglaia fear Myshkin, a revealing fact in that it suggests that Dostoevsky himself was aware that the prince would have to share some of the responsibility for the havoc raised by his perfection.²² Aglaia tells him during the outing to the Pavlovsk bandstand, "I am afraid of you. . . ." (*Idiot*, 330) And in the stillness of the room, beside Nastasya's deathbed, Rogozhin, though not comprehending, relates to Myshkin, "it was you she was afraid of." (*Idiot*, 579) Aglaia was doubtless merely frightened by his "strangeness"; Nastasya, however, could not tolerate his pity for her. In the end, it is her words which may stand as a judgment on this "perfect man."

Can one love every one, all men, all one's neighbors? I have often asked myself that question. Of course not. It's unnatural indeed. In abstract love for humanity one almost always loves no one but oneself. (*Idiot*, 432)

III

This brings us back to the psychological type of the Redeemer and a statement of Nietzsche's which suggests yet another possible meaning of the word "idiot." "Christianity is possible as the *most private* form of existence. It presupposes a narrow, withdrawn, completely unpolitical society—it belongs in the convent." (III, 588) This allusion to Christianity as something private could be taken to mean "subjective," were it not for the subsequent qualifying statement which defines "private" as withdrawn, in the sense of "unpolitical." This opens the way to another use of the word "idiot" first pointed out in a little-known essay by Martin Dibelius.

We should remember that the Greek word, *idiotes*, that was taken over into Latin as *idiota*, denotes the private person in contrast to the statesman, the layman in contrast to the artist, the ignorant in

contrast to the learned. . . . the word idiot has been understood and passed on as signifying a man without culture.

And, more specifically, with regard to the psychological type of the Redeemer: Jesus, he who was infected with an instinctive hatred of all reality, who resisted not, who proclaimed that the kingdom of heaven is in us, who was a stranger to the state, to culture, to society—this Jesus could very well have been called an “idiot” by Nietzsche in the [above] sense. . . .²³

Dibelius’s reminder casts a revealing light on Nietzsche’s use of the word “idiot.” That Nietzsche juxtaposes “private” and “political” in this way and implies their mutual exclusiveness suggests that he is taking for granted, not the modern but the ancient Greek distinction between private and political (or public). This would not seem a far-fetched claim to make of Nietzsche, student of Greece that he was. And it would fit into place beside his social or, to use the ancient equivalent of this modern term, political theory of a hierarchical caste system, essentially Platonic in structure. Finally, in a similar instance in *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche describes the Jewish-Christian community out of which Jesus (this, according to Nietzsche, supremely *private* man) emerged and which survived him as “an *absurdly unpolitical* community.” (II, 1189) That is to say, in the Greek sense, a community centered around the home and the family rather than around the public (political) institutions based on ties other than kinship, in which the part of life which is uniquely human, as opposed to the merely necessary and useful, is lived. Hannah Arendt has written of this Greek notion,

. . . a life spent in the privacy of “one’s own” (*idion*), outside the world of the common, is “idiotic” by definition. . . . In ancient feeling the privative trait of privacy, indicated in the word itself, was all-important; it meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even the highest and most human of man’s capacities.²⁴

It is in this sense, then, that Nietzsche is saying that Jesus lived the *most private* form of existence. And as long as he remained within the narrow confines of his own “*absurdly unpolitical* community,” he was in no danger. But when he crossed over into the public (political) realm of Rome, he became “a political criminal. . . . This brought him to the cross. . . .” (II, 1189) Similarly, one can imagine Nietzsche seeing the seeds of the tragedy of Prince Myshkin in the introduction of this extremely private person into a political community. Christianity is possible, as Nietzsche put it, only “in the convent,” not in the world.

The *kingdom of heaven* is a state of the heart (it is said of the children, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”); not something that is “above the earth.” The Kingdom of God is not “to come” chronologically-historically; not according to the calendar, something that would be there one day but not the previous day. Rather, it is a “change of heart in the individual,” something that comes at any time and is at all times not yet there. (III, 643)

IV

There is a very great deal in Nietzsche's Jesus that is intriguing, even enticing. And we can certainly agree with the principle which guides it throughout, "that the *real* human being is worth much more than the 'wished for' human being of any prevailing ideal." (III, 673) It is undoubtedly this "realness" of Jesus as a human being which makes Nietzsche's picture so appealing. Overbeck said of it,

All previous attempts to make a human figure of him [Jesus] appear ridiculously abstract and as no more than an illustration of rationalistic dogmatics beside Nietzsche's achievement and the way in which, in it, that which is human in the man springs forth out of that which is peculiar.²⁵

It is true. Nevertheless, we must in the end, however reluctantly, say that this Jesus is not the Jesus of the New Testament record. And there must be reasons for this "no."

It is difficult to fault Nietzsche's account of who Jesus was because, contrary to other authors of "lives of Jesus," he claimed no historical authenticity for his picture. After admitting that he does not approach the Gospels as a critical philologist, Nietzsche adds,

What do I care about the contradictions in the "tradition"? How can one call saints' legends "tradition" in the first place? The biographies of saints are the most ambiguous kind of literature there is: to apply scientific methods to them, *in the absence of any other documents*, strikes me as doomed to failure from the start—mere scholarly idleness. (II, 1190)

Similarly, in a letter of the same period, Nietzsche writes Overbeck that he has read Renan's *Origines*, only to wonder "whether history is even *possible*. What does one wish to establish? Something that, even at the time of its occurrence, was not 'established'?" (III, 1250) We can perhaps detect in Nietzsche's way of putting the question echoes of Jacob Burckhardt's reaction against the conception of history as scientific historiography being given currency by his mentor, Leopold von Ranke. That is to say, when Nietzsche wonders "whether history is even possible," he is doubting that it is possible to show what actually happened.²⁶ With regard to the question of who Jesus was, Nietzsche is subscribing to the findings of Strauss's first *Life of Jesus*, findings which were, by and large, unaccepted in theological circles well into the twentieth century.²⁷

What concerns him is "Not the truth concerning what he did, what he said, how he really died"; (II, 1190) not the "life of Jesus," of which he writes, "The attempts I know to read a *history* of a 'soul' out of the Gospels seem to me proof of a contemptible psychological frivolity." (II, 1190) His interest in the psychological type of the Redeemer is thus not aimed at reconstructing Jesus' *psyche* out of the Gospels but at getting at the *man* Jesus by, as it were, reading between the lines of the Gospels;

that is, by taking into account the ascription to Jesus on the part of his followers and admirers of words and characteristics which were very likely alien to the man himself. This psychological type, we have already heard Nietzsche say, could be contained in the Gospels despite the Gospels, however overloaded with alien features. Such an approach, needless to say, does not facilitate an any less biased reading of the Gospels than any other approach. But the assumptions on which Nietzsche's reading is based are clearly revealed by the phrase, "the psychological type of the Redeemer." They are three in number, the first being negative, the latter two positive: that the element of aggressive fanaticism was "introduced" into the tradition by Jesus' followers; that it was the *way* Jesus lived and died that is significant ("only Christian *practice*, a life such as he *lived* who died on the cross, is Christian" II, 1200); and that both the key to this way of life and its consequence are redemption (thus, "the Redeemer type"). The way of life he found to be "Not a faith, but a doing; above all, a *not* doing of many things. . . ." (II, 1200) And redemption he called "a state of the heart . . . a change of heart in the individual." (III, 643) Therefore, the genuine Christian way of life is also "the *most private* form of existence." (III, 588)

In spite of himself Nietzsche has, with this last judgment, denied Jesus full humanity. For to be fully human is, as Nietzsche himself would have conceded, to be active; and action, that uniquely human activity, "the capacity of beginning something anew," in Hannah Arendt's fine phrase, requires plurality, that is, other men. Finally, "this plurality is *the* condition . . . of all political life."²⁸ In denying the life Jesus lived, the Christian way of life, a public (political) existence, Nietzsche has flown in the face of his own efforts to see Jesus as fully human.

This is in keeping with his overall view that Jesus was a decadent, in the sense of waning life—"neurotic, epileptic, visionary. . . ." (III, 641) Nietzsche calls Jesus' commandment, "'resist not evil"—the most profound word of the Gospels, their key in a certain sense."²⁹ (II, 1191) However, this was not really construed by Nietzsche as a matter of choice, but as "the inability for resistance . . . not *being* able to be an enemy." (II, 1191)³⁰ He also emphasizes that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to the *children*. . . ."; but this he conceives as "an infantilism that has receded into the spiritual," (II, 1193) a case of retarded puberty. "*Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, *not* to hold responsible—but to resist not even the evil one—to *love* him." (II, 1197) But again, there is no alternative; it is merely "love as the only, the *last* possible, way of life." (II, 1191)

What Nietzsche could not allow, and what must be allowed if Jesus is not to be deprived of his full humanity, is that there is such a thing as *goodness* which is of value in itself and is not derivative of some ulterior source. For Nietzsche, "altruistic acts are only a *species* of egoistic ones"; (III, 615) good deeds, as such, are unthinkable. Thus, a significant aspect of Jesus' action, of the *newness* of his way of life, Nietzsche is unable to

concede. In characterizing Jesus' way of life as the most private form of existence, Nietzsche has forfeited his right to the claim that "genuine, original Christianity will be possible at all times." (II, 1200) The two assertions are mutually exclusive, for genuine, original Christianity needs the world as well as the privacy of "one's own." It is true that genuine goodness does not seek to display itself. And Hannah Arendt is right to point out that "The one activity taught by Jesus in word and deed is the activity of goodness, and goodness obviously harbors a tendency to hide from being seen or heard."³¹ Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them. . . ." (Matthew 6:1) But he also said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) There is a difference between vainglorious vaunting of oneself and visible goodness, and it is a crucial one. That a good deed is witnessed does not detract from its goodness. In spite of the fact that Nietzsche saw the visibility of Jesus' way of life as being purely symbolic in nature, he did conclude that if Christianity is a way of life, Christians should have something to show for their Christianity—they should *act* differently.

Nietzsche was certain that it was Jesus' way of acting and being that was new. And yet, by condemning it to privacy, he denied it precisely what it must have to survive—other men. He succeeded with his picture of Jesus (as Dostoevsky succeeded with his Myshkin) in portraying only a kind of negative goodness, goodness as a last resort. But Jesus did not hate reality, nor love as a last resort. Nietzsche's picture of Jesus as anti-realist, symbolist, witness only to inner truths, "a mixture of the sublime, the sickly, and the childlike" (II, 1193)—in short, as idiot (perfect and private), has the effect of clearing the air surrounding the question as to who Jesus was. In the end we must confess that the psychological type of the Redeemer cannot be identified with the Jesus of the New Testament record. But we make our confession humbly and in gratitude for this magnificent attempt to steer us toward asking the right questions—questions of value, ethical questions—and toward the man, Jesus, who lived and died, not to redeem men, but to show us how we must live and die.

NOTES

1. By which I mean simply that there is no evidence—neither in the records which have survived of what he read, nor in his own works—that he devoted much time to explicitly theological studies. The conversation carried on over many years during his long friendship with Franz Overbeck should, however, be recalled.

2. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechtha (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1954–56), vol. II, p. 1190. Hereafter cited in the text. Most of the translations are my own; some are selections from *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954).

3. *Karl Barth, From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (London: SCM press, 1959), p. 381.

4. There is in this last statement an implicit rejection of the late Strauss, of *The Old*

Faith and the New, who was the brunt of Nietzsche's polemic in 1873. In that book, Strauss concluded that Jesus was a spiritual fanatic.

5. "He died for *his* guilt. All evidence is lacking, however often it has been claimed, that he died for the guilt of others." (II, 1189)

6. Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 82.

7. By Josef Hofmiller, in his "Nietzsche," *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* (Munich, 1931), p. 82.

8. Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, trans. C. B. Ashton (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), p. 22.

9. There is no mention of the word "idiot" in Nietzsche's writings prior to this time. Cf. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, June 1963), p. 396, note 2; and Kaufmann, *Portable Nietzsche*, p. 601, note 1, for a listing of the locations of the word in Nietzsche's works. In preparing previously published material for inclusion in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Nietzsche even went to the extent of inserting the word "idiot" at two points. Nor does this single word provide the only clue to the likelihood of Dostoevsky's influence, as witness, for example, this unpublished note of the period in question: "'Become as little children'—the *relatedness*: Francis of Assisi, neurotic, epileptic, visionary, like Jesus." (III, p. 641)

10. Cf. also the letter to Georg Brandes dated Turin, 20 November 1888, in which Nietzsche says of Dostoevsky, "I esteem him as the most valuable psychological material I know—I am, in a peculiar way, grateful to him even though he goes against my most basic instincts. About the same relationship that I have with Pascal, whom I nearly love because he has taught me such a great deal: the only logical Christian." (III, 1334–35)

11. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche. Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 291.

12. Jessie Coulson, *Dostoevsky. A Self-Portrait* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 168. I have altered the translation slightly, using, instead of "a wholly beautiful human character," Ronald Hingley's "a positively good man." (*The Undiscovered Dostoevsky* [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962], p. 111).

13. A. Steinberg, *Dostoevsky* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1966), p. 64.

14. Coulson, p. 169.

15. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1935), p. 528.

16. George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Peregrine, 1967), pp. 149–50.

17. In a translator's note on Berdyaev's discussion of the latter extreme of Dostoevsky's two principles of love, sensuality and pity, Donald Attwater writes, "The primary meaning of the Russian word *zhalost* (or *jalost*) is 'pity.' Here it is used in a very common sense (especially in the popular language) to mean a mixture of love, pity, and protectiveness, somewhat the feeling of a parent for his helpless child." (Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. Donald Attwater [Cleveland & New York: Meridian Books, November 1962], p. 116).

18. Berdyaev, p. 127.

19. Murray Krieger, "Dostoevsky's 'Idiot': The Curse of Saintliness," in *Dostoevsky*, ed. Rene Wellek (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Spectrum Books, 1962), p. 48.

20. John Middleton Murry, *Fyodor Dostoevsky* (London: Martin and Secker, 1916), pp. 152, 155.

21. Berdyaev, p. 43.

22. Murray Krieger claims "to find the novel casting some of the blame on Myshkin. . . ." *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

23. Martin Dibelius, "Der 'psychologische Typus des Erlösers' bei Friedrich Nietzsche," in *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift fuer Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 22 Jahrgang, Heft 1, 1944 (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag), pp. 65–67, 73.

24. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), p. 35.

25. Quoted in Carl Albrecht Bernoulli, *Franz Overbeck und Friedrich Nietzsche. Eine Freundschaft* (Jena: Diedrichs, 1908), vol. II, p. 250.

26. This is not to say that Nietzsche would share Burckhardt's pessimism, any more than he was convinced by Schopenhauer's pessimism (which, in truth, are one and the same). It is only to suggest that, despite his expressed admiration for von Ranke both as a man of integrity and as a scholar, Nietzsche felt obliged to reject his (and, before him, Hegel's) efforts to systematize history.

27. It was not until after 1926, the year Albert Schweitzer's *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* appeared, that it became finally impossible to ignore the problematic nature of the Gospels as historical documents.

28. Arendt, p. 10.

29. As, of course, did Tolstoy. But there the similarity between the two men on this matter ends.

30. Only once, and that in an unpublished note, does Nietzsche imply that not resisting evil is a matter of choice and done out of strength, not weakness: "*Christ's example*: he does not resist those who do him evil; he does not defend himself. He does more: he 'turns the other cheek'. . . . He forbids his disciples to defend him; he makes it clear that he could have help, but does not *want* it." (III, 659)

31. Arendt, p. 66.